

# Airlines' latest tactic to win customers: In-flight gourmet food



CAMILLA CORNELL | October 16, 2015 | Last Updated: Oct 16 9:41 AM ET  
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Chef David Hawsworth created nine seasonal dishes for Air Canada's international business class flights and its Maple Leaf Lounge. Ryan Emberley

Air Canada fired the latest volley in a bid to attract high-paying business class passengers this month, when it teamed up with chef David Hawsworth to create a selection of nine seasonal dishes for international business class flights and the Maple Leaf Lounge.

Hawsworth, who trained at several of Europe's Michelin-starred restaurants, has won countless awards for his self-named Vancouver dining spot.

As of Oct. 1, Air Canada passengers will get a chance to try his offerings. Among them, an appetizer of sushi-grade tuna tataki with a delicately sweet puree and the surprising crunch of puffed rice; a main that makes full use of Air Canada's new steam ovens to produce a succulently moist tamari-roasted sable fish with (healthy) brown rice and bok choy; and a densely rich chocolate fondant with blackberry coulis for dessert.

"I usually don't even eat the food in business class because I've tried everything and I just find it boring," said road warrior Vito Mabrucco, senior vice-president of IDC (International Data Corp.) and one of a select few invited to sample the new menu on the tarmac at Air Canada's Toronto hangar. "But this is really great quality."

The bad news: if you're flying within North America or you're relegated to economy class (where I tend to hang out) you won't get a chance to try it. Like many airlines, Air Canada is doing its best to attract high-value business class passengers. The reason is pure economics: about a third of the passengers on a plane — those flying in the premium cabins or paying full fare for economy tickets — account for about two-thirds of an airline's revenue.



Air Canada's tamari roasted sablefish.

Handout/Air Canada

And although lie-flat seats are still the main selling point of business or first-class offerings, they've become *de rigueur* on international flights. "Food and in-flight entertainment can be a differentiator, particularly on day flights," said Jennifer Pearson, manager of communications for Cathay Pacific in Canada.

Cathay Pacific offers both Chinese and Western cuisine on its flights, "sourcing fresh and local ingredients where possible." Earlier this year, it partnered with top chefs from Mandarin Oriental hotel properties in Hong Kong, London, Paris, New York, San Francisco, Tokyo and Boston to add pizzazz to its menus.